

Parenting Through _____: A Collection of Ideas for Parenting with Intention

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First- Meeting parents where you are:

Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old he will not depart from it. - Proverbs 22:6

The word “train” has not meant the same to me since I saw the Rocky montages. One requirement for me to date my husband was to watch all of the Rocky movies with him. He is quite a fan. The Rocky soundtrack was all that was allowed to be played outside in our barn-back in the days when he actually had time to “work on his fitness” out there.

Doesn't parenting feel a lot like this? As parents we are constantly, tirelessly training our children.

Just like Rocky,
We've got onlookers smiling while we suffer.
Someone beating our belly while we're killing ourselves to keep going.
We're holding on by one hand, sweating, getting yelled at, eating raw eggs (if there's time to eat at all). We're dusty, cold, racing, and largely, alone.
Oh, and don't even get us started on our clothes.

Mickey: Why do you wear that old sweaty thing?

Rocky Balboa: It brings me luck.

Mickey: It brings you flies. -Rocky II

That's on a great day.
Then there's COVID. Quarantine. Homeschooling. Pressure... Oh boy... Great, big sigh.
Probably some chest pain too.

I know that's where many of you are. That's why I have worked with many friends and colleagues to create this document that I hope will give you practical steps and guidance for parenting with greater intention and self-preservation. As you read this, please allow yourself grace. Please be inspired, but please allow yourself time to make changes. This advice comes from years of trials and errors. This advice was bought with tears, anxiety, sleepless nights, self-doubt, and feelings of isolation and failure. These ideas have not come easily or always naturally. Some days, they still don't.

So, if these are new concepts for you, please be gentle with yourself, knowing that none of us have perfected parenting.

Allow this article to find you in a place where we all have been: sitting at your table with a paper and pencil (and probably kleenex), planning actual steps to make your goals for your home and your children come to life.

“In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.” -Mr. Rogers

Rocky: Let me tell you something you already know. The world ain't all sunshine and rainbows. It is a very mean and nasty place and it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain't how hard you hit; it's about how hard you can get hit, and keep moving forward. How much you can take, and keep moving forward. -Rocky Balboa, 2006

Big Picture Goals:

First of all, let's look at the big picture, then we can narrow our scope.

What do our children need from us? Below, I'm going to pull some ideas from a few different resources to create a list of some vital areas to consider in parenting. Again, please take this slowly. Please try to read this list with self-compassion and hope for your future, rather than allowing self-doubt or criticism to berate you for things that you have not tried yet.

A branch of therapy called “Theraplay” suggests that children need the following:

Structure

*(based on current conversations with parents, this is particularly important for electronic use)

Engagement

Nurturing

Challenge

From the world of neuroscience, we learn that children need:

Movement

Help with Emotional Processing

Help with learning and practicing Coping Skills

From the expressive arts therapies, we learn that children need:

Story-telling (connection to their heritage)

Music

Arts
Dance
Silence
Play

From homeschooling experts, we learn that children need:
Family Reading time
Time to explore Nature
Spiritual guidance

Many of these areas will overlap at times, but I feel that this is a good starting point for us to dig into the great question: “How do I do that?”
So, here we go...

How do I do that?

Structure (Including Electronic Use):

- Structure helps to create an environment of safety, organization, and emotional regulation.
- It may be helpful to think of “routine” in terms of “natural rhythm”. I understand that “routine” can feel overwhelming for some parents. If that is the case for you, consider how you would like for your day to flow, and begin to consider how you might achieve this by the way you order the day.
- As a starting point, try to begin going to bed and waking around the same time each day (even if everyone is at home for the day).
- Good habits and routines/rhythms make for smoother days.
- In my opinion, structure is absolutely vital to a peaceful home. Structure doesn’t mean that every moment of the day needs to be planned ahead of time, but it does mean that family members all have an idea of what to expect during the day. Morning and evening routines are especially important, and it is also important that these routines be clearly expressed and understood by everyone in the family.
- Communication among all family members is valuable for creating structure. Children need parents to communicate their expectations. This is important for children of all ages. If your expectation for your child is for him/her to get up, dress, and come to breakfast, they need to know this. More importantly, however, some children need for you to tell them HOW to do this. I think parents often overload their children with requests, which results in conflict, unmet expectations, or the parent excessively repeating directions.

When (not if) this happens, this is an opportunity to model humility to your child. As the parent you can say, “Let’s pause. I see that I may have given you too much to do at one time. Let’s slow down and try this again together.”

Side note: Model Humility. It’s ok to make mistakes, and it’s ok to admit those. I remember one day, early in my career as a high school English teacher, I came down too harshly on a student. I felt badly about this, so the next day, I called him to the side to apologize for my harshness. After that, even though he didn’t always agree with what I was teaching or encouraging the class to do, he was always respectful. I don’t think that he had ever had an adult to admit their faults in his life. When I did so, he stopped fighting me so hard.

- Use this time at home to help your children build life skills and add them to the daily routine: self-care, chores, and coping skills. Again, start with just one, and add another to the routine as the children reach mastery.
- Make use of charts to communicate expectations. Charts are easy to find online or you can create your own. Many families whom I work with are benefiting from also including self-care items on daily charts for their children. For example, in addition to chores, these charts may list: reading time, time outside, exercise time, spiritual time (devotion, prayer), art/music, communicating to someone in-person, etc.
*Again, children (no matter their age), do not know what you expect of them unless you tell them. Visual charts or lists are great ways to help parents to communicate expectations clearly while reducing time reminding/repeating directions. (You’ll also see below that the completion of this list/chart is a good way for children to earn screen time).
- Add coping skills for managing boredom to your daily routine/rhythm. Many parents feel that they must constantly entertain their children. Creativity is born of boredom. It may be helpful to provide a list of options for independent play (picture charts for younger children are a helpful way to teach them how to play independently). This is also a way to help reduce screen time.
- **Positive Reinforcement** is also helpful in motivating children to comply with structure. This is also a way to blend the aspect of challenge along with structure. For example, “Let’s see how long it takes us to fill our sticker chart for following our daily routine! When it’s full, we can _____” (fill in blank with fun family activity). Currently, our family is using positive reinforcement to earn a banana split party!
- **Choices** are powerful for children, as they need age-appropriate control in their lives. If a child does not have some control, they often rebel or withdraw. As you build structure and make everyday decisions related to your children, invite them to have choices in the things that will affect them.

*Areas to offer choices for children: activities/toys they choose, clothes for the day, food choices (including healthy food choices, “I need for you to have a fruit with your breakfast, would you rather have an apple or orange?”), chores, expectations (for example, for a teen, “would you like to negotiate a reasonable time to come home at night or not go at all?”).

As long as the child’s choice doesn’t hurt themselves or anyone else in the world, then provide them with as many choices during the day as possible.

I often recommend the book *Parenting with Love and Logic* by Cline and Fay to parents, as this approach addresses the value of providing choices. The Love and Logic approach to control says, “Don’t be greedy. Never take any more control than you absolutely need.” They go on to say that “the more control you relinquish now, the more they (the child) gain now. That’s the self-control that they will use to make good decisions in establishing themselves as adults.” (*Parenting Teens with Love and Logic*, by Cline and Fay)

Love and Logic recommendations for how to offer choices:

“You’re welcome to _____ or _____.”

“Feel free to _____ or _____.”

“Would you rather _____ or _____?”

“What would be best for you _____ or _____?”

**It is important to remember that you should not offer choices if your child argues with your original request, as this can lead to manipulation. This may already be a habit for your family (as I often hear parents (and myself) share frustration about negotiating with their children). As you begin the habit of offering choices, be mindful to offer the choices before you give a directive (again, be patient with yourself, as this habit takes time to develop. It’s difficult to think of choices when you’re busy, but this will come more naturally in time).

**With directives, try to use strong statements like “I need you to _____” vs. “Would you like to _____.”

Screen Time:

- First of all, monitor your own use of screens. You are the best model for your child.
- For screen time, designate time limits (for children and adults). It may be helpful to set a timer to end the screen session so that you, the parent, don’t have to be the “bad guy” in this.

- Monitor your child's basic needs before screen use. If he/she is hungry, tired, needing to use the restroom, etc. meet those needs first, as this will cause further dysregulation when screen time is over. (from Kate and Cory podcast)
- Be proactive with screen time expectations. Before providing screen time, communicate your expectations for how to end screen time in a peaceful manner.
- One chart that I love is the "Screen Time Contract" (can be found with google search). This holds children accountable for completing household, self-care, educational, and screen-free goals as a way of earning screen time. I think that it is important to remember that free time with electronics is a privilege for children, not a right. I believe that children benefit from learning to earn privileges, even at young ages.
- Talk to your children about electronic use! Ask them what they are seeing, what's going on in their friend groups. Be clear that in order for your child to maintain online presence, they are expected to maintain responsibility and community with you. **Ask about this every single day!** (From *Social Problem Solver e-Book*).

More Ideas for Building General Structure in your Routine/Rhythm:

-Try to focus on 1-3 things to accomplish each day, but allow yourself grace if the list is not fully accomplished. Pace yourself. The end goal is not how much you've done, but how engaged you were with what you did.

-Ask a trusted friend for a sample routine to gauge what might work for you, but try not to compare. Comparing yourself to others will steal your joy.

-Have in mind an acceptable amount of screen time and let your children (and yourself) enjoy that, but follow through with turning it off when time is up.

***for parents: As you consider building structure into your day, consider things that you can plan and prepare for upfront so as to reduce chaos in the day.

For example, each morning before our children get up (and the chaos begins), I try to get everyone's water cups filled for the day, set out our vitamins, and empty the dishwasher (as my children get a bit older, I'll shift this task over to them). Just having these simple tasks complete, helps me to feel more prepared to meet my children's needs.

This is also helpful if you're planning a special activity or craft. A little planning and preparation ahead of time can make the activity much more enjoyable for everyone, and much less stressful for you.

*** for parents: build your time for watching the news around your child's schedule. Avoid allowing them to watch negative news stories. This is one area from which I've noticed increasing anxiety in children. Even teens are not developmentally able to consume negative

news with adult logic. Therefore, it has a tremendous emotional toil on children (even when they don't verbalize this to others, and often, they don't).

***for parents: You can work to be a problem-solver for your family. Rather than focusing on the problem, or allowing your mind to dwell on anxiety or frustration, try to step into the role of problem-solver.

Keep a journal and think about what is going well in your family and what is not. Keep track of your success, no matter how small! This helps you to keep going with this hard work of parenting!

For things that are frustrating you, this means something needs to change. Brainstorm and pray for ways to modify your family's routine, so that things will run more smoothly.

If you have multiple frustrations, just start with one, and work on it until it's a habit before adding something new.

Ask for help!!! Enlist the help of a respected parent, teacher, neighbor, or even therapist. You don't have to do this alone. Again, training/parenting your children is one of (if not the) hardest jobs you'll ever do. Break the stigma of "I have to be strong." NO!... You have to keep on so that you don't become too overwhelmed to be present with your children. That means you need support. Please, ask for help, even if you're just asking for a listening ear.

Engagement:

"We've learned to save the moments that were always here."-Coca-Cola Commercial, 2020

"When my head hits the pillow each night, I want to know that I have done the one most important thing: I have fostered warm, happy memories and created lifelong bonds with my kids—even when the rest of life feels hard."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*

"To a child, LOVE is spelled t-i-m-e." -Zig Ziglar

"Let your children know, 'I am in this moment with you. I am paying attention to you.' Put your cell phone away and be present. Don't pressure yourself to come up with ideas to entertain your children; they just need time.

Some days, if I'm not feeling well, we lay in bed together. We take pictures and just act silly together. Try to end your workday at the normal time, without returning to your computer to check-in. Play board games. Go outside and play frisbee, throw water balloons, or spray one another with the garden hose."

-(Insight from a mother of 4, working from home, home-schooling. While this mother was talking with me, her 11 year old daughter was sitting with her, smiling and nodding in agreement).

- Check in daily with your children.
I like to ask my children to tell me something good about their day, something they're thankful for, and something that was hard or upset/worried them today.
Be careful not to assume you know how they felt about their day. I'm often surprised by these responses from my children.
- Build things together! Blocks, Tents, Forts, Legos, Sandcastles, Amazon boxes...
Fill those tents and forts with all kinds of things and hang out in there... READ in there!... go on adventures with whatever you build.
- Teach your children a new skill or learn one together.
- Eat Together! Try to eliminate screens from meal time.
- Discuss your child's interests. Establish your child's top 10 things they like to talk about or do. Write them down, and follow up on a regular basis by asking about how these areas are going. (From *Social Problem Solver e-Book*)
- Serve together. Be intentional in teaching your children to consider and help others. Pinterest has printables for "random acts of kindness" which may help to jumpstart this habit. This will require intention and planning for the parent, but it will benefit your entire family. If you need to, log a service project in your planner so you can hold yourself accountable.

Ideas for family service:

- Take a meal or snack to someone who needs encouragement
- Notice the needs of your neighbors, and see if there is a way you can help
- Send art work by your children to those who need encouragement. If you don't know of anyone, you could send a piece of art with a note of appreciation to a local first responders unit, or to a local nursing home, church, or hospital.
There are so many people in our society, especially now, who need to be reminded that they are important and appreciated.
- Write a prayer and send it to someone who needs encouragement.
- Make "busy bags" with crayons, coloring books, and puzzles for patients at a children's hospital.

"Raising our children isn't just about getting them ready for adulthood. It isn't just about preparation for a career. It's about transforming and shaping their hearts and minds. It's about nourishing their souls, building relationships, and forging connections. It's about nurturing within them care and compassion for whomever they encounter."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*

Nurturing:

“It’s easier for me to say ‘no’ to my child when she wants a lot of stuff because I know I have given her so much of myself.” -from, askdrsears.com

- Use affirmations. Strive for a high number of encouraging/praising words and low number of critical/corrective words. In marriage counseling, couples are encouraged to set their end-goal for 20:1 praise/criticism ratio. Naturally, this will be more difficult to do with our children, as our job is to teach and correct them. However, in doing so, we can be mindful of our tone and non-verbal communication. Even in correcting our children, we can be gentle and loving. This makes a world of difference in the way they perceive the instruction.

Many people rely heavily on non-verbal communication. While this is very important, we must not underestimate the value of the spoken word, especially for children. They need to know (and hear often) that we love them, we are proud of them, we are grateful for them, they are special, and that we believe in them.

They need to hear us tell them that we trust them. That they make us happy. That they have a unique and important role in our family. That we trust them. That we believe in them.

“I like you just the way you are.” -Mr. Rogers

- Physical affection.
One of my most comforting childhood memories is my mother rubbing my back at night. Now, my little girl loves for me to scratch her bug bites before bed (even if she doesn’t have any!)
One thing my little girls enjoy is me tending to their “owies”. We have big tubes of coco-butter lip balm, so we rub that on their minor hurts, and it works wonders!
Another option is using a cotton ball or lotion to rub on their scrapes and bruises. They work hard to get those “owies”, and they delight when we notice them and care for them. We honor and validate the hard work of play when we tend to these wounds.

“Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity.” -Kay Redfield Jamison

- Solicit ideas from each family member about things that they would like to do when the family has a day or weekend off. This way, children can see that their ideas and desires are valued and important.
- Back to eating together... eating healthy helps your children to value their body. This teaches them the necessity of caring for their physical health as well. If they are resistant, keep offering healthy choices. Only offer treats after a healthy meal or snack.

More Ideas for Nurturing: (for children of any age)

“I love you rituals” from Conscious Disciple (google search)

Ask your child for a 30 second hug.

Paint fingernails together.

Let your children put stickers on your face or arms.

Let them build forts on you with their blankets and pillows.

Cook together (so simple, but so powerful).

Look them in their eyes, often.

Sit on the floor with them, often.

Smile at them, often.

Use a gentle tone of voice as much as possible.

Read together.

Play outside together.

Tell jokes and riddles. (There are apps available for “a joke a day”)

Comb each other’s hair.

Sing songs together (“Let’s Be Together” by Mr. Rogers is great for little children)

“What if, instead of trying to make the most of our time, we worked harder at savoring it?”

— Sarah Mackenzie, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakable Peace*

Challenge:

- Returning to the concept of affirmations, acknowledge when your children are facing a challenge. Encourage them verbally without taking over. Allow them to take time to think about “how to do this?” rather than telling them what to do.

Building gingerbread houses at Christmas is an example that leaps into my memory. It was quite a struggle for my husband and I to step back and allow our daughter to “build” her first gingerbread house, but boy was she proud of it! It was nothing that my husband or I would have made, but that’s the point... the work of a child is their own. Allow them to express themselves without feeling pressure to conform to your adult standards. In doing so, you’re teaching them to be a problem-solver and allowing them to build confidence in themselves.

- Let your children help you with things around your home. Kids are very capable, and they feel good when they know they are valued for their own contributions to the family.

My sister-in-law shares with me that she can see a contented sigh or smile when her three boys complete a job. She shares that her children have especially loved extended-family projects. For example, after Hurricane Florence, two of our family members had flooded basements. My sister-in-law and her family piled in their old farm truck, eager to go and help our family in need. Another family project has been helping family members clean out old barns (we all live on what used to be the family tobacco farm, so there have been plenty of opportunities for such jobs).

The treasure in this is that the children are looking beyond themselves, even beyond their own home, to offer help. Through these opportunities to work together and help others, they have grown empathy and compassion.

“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each does its work.” -Ephesians 4:16

“Whatever you do, work at it as if for the Lord, not for man.” Colossians 3:23

“Do everything without complaining or arguing.” Philippians 2:14

“Let us not grow weary of doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.” Galatians 6:9

“You shall eat the fruit of your labor” Psalm 128:2

- Make chore time, family time! All chores may not be done to adult standards, but continue to gently teach your children new skills. Fill them with words like, “I knew you could do that!”, “You’re such an important part of our family!” “That was a hard job, but you worked hard, and you did it!”
- Beginning at an early age, allow for safe, natural consequences to teach your children. (From *Parenting with Love and Logic*). For example, if your expectation is for them to put their dirty clothes in the hamper, then a natural consequence for not doing so would be that they miss out on wearing their favorite shirt today (as it was on their floor, rather than in the hamper, and didn’t get washed in time).
- If behaviors are a problem for you as the parent, it’s important to let it be a problem for the child as well, as this will move you both to a solution.

Movement:

- This one seems pretty basic for some parents, but for others, getting their children to move is a real challenge.

Screen time is a huge barrier to movement. Again, please consider the use of Screen Time contracts to help manage electronic use.

Ideas for Movement:

Family Walks

Toss a ball together

Frisbee

Family Workouts

Family Bike Rides

Yoga Cards or online workouts

*Pinterest has lots of ideas for family workout plans (it may be helpful for you to try them out first, so you can help your children as needed).

Help with Emotional Processing:

“Anything that’s human is mentionable, and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable. When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting, and less scary. The people we trust with that important talk can help us know that we are not alone.”

— Fred Rogers

“When we can talk about our feelings, they become less overwhelming, less upsetting and less scary.” -Mr. Rogers

- Help your children to think about ways to solve problems.
For example, for a toddler, this may be as simple as asking, “When you’re done with your juice box, where should it go?”
An example for helping older children with this may be: if siblings are having a disagreement (or a child is having conflict with a friend), invite them to sit down and share their ideas of how to handle the situation. This will take more time for the parent, but in doing so, you’re teaching them the powerful tool of problem-solving. It is easy for children to get caught up in negative emotions, and they need help shifting through those in order to see a positive (or tolerable) outcome.
Many of the children whom I’ve treated over the years have had really good ideas for improving problems in their lives. They just needed someone to sit down, listen to them, and offer some guidance as to how to put their ideas to work.
- Set up an established time and place to talk at home (add this to your calendar as “family talk time”) (from Social Problem Solver e-book)

- Meet them where they are. Dan Siegel's work shows us that neither children (nor adults) can think logically when they are very upset. When your child is upset, don't try to use logic or reasoning right away. Instead, reflect what you're seeing in them behaviorally and emotionally. Then move to problem-solving or reasoning. For example when addressing a hysterical child, using an opening statement like this, "Honey, I see that you're very upset. I see that you're crying. I see that you stopped playing with your friends. I'm here to help you through this hard time. Can I give you a hug or just sit here with you for a moment until you're ready to talk?"

I love the statement, "I see that you are _____". Children need to know that their parents are attuned to them, watching them, noticing them, and available to help when needed.

"It's also crucial to keep in mind that no matter how nonsensical and frustrating our child's feelings may seem to us, they are real and important to our child. It's vital that we treat them as such in our response."
— Daniel J. Siegel, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive*

- As a child therapist, I often encourage parents to work on their own emotional wounds, as these largely play into their parenting, and therefore, the child's emotions and behavior. Many parents tell me that they want to get their child settled (through therapy) first, then they will work on themselves. I urge you NOT to do this. As a parent heals, so will their child. Also, this allows the parents to be in a place where they can model self-care and emotional regulation to their children in the most effective environment possible... home.

Make every effort to avoid venting your concerns, frustrations, or fears in front of your children. They will learn how to respond to stressful situations by watching you.

"As parents become more aware and emotionally healthy, their children reap the rewards and move toward health as well. That means that integrating and cultivating your own brain is one of the most loving and generous gifts you can give your children."
— Daniel J. Siegel, *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind, Survive Everyday Parenting Struggles, and Help Your Family Thrive*

Teach Coping Skills:

- Children need coping skills. One of my mistakes as a parent has been my effort to always try to make my children happy. I am learning that this is not realistic. No one is

always happy. All people, including children, have real emotions. Adult problems are different from a child's problems, but the emotional reactions are the same.

Therefore, I would be doing my children a disservice if I didn't teach them how to deal with suffering. We must remember that our children were not created to be happy all of the time, so we should not expect this of them.

- **First things first... you have got to practice coping skills with your children if you want them to value them. They must see you doing these things in order to feel that these skills are truly important.**

Some basic ways to regulate our emotions are:

-taking deep breaths when you feel stressed

-stepping away from a situation to settle before responding

-Using "I statements" (I feel _____ because _____. I need _____.)

(example, "I feel overwhelmed because you've asked me to do so many things at one time. I need to slow down and do one thing at the time.)

-Journaling (parent and child can sit together to write in individual journals, or they can have a special journal for communicating back and forth to one another).

-Applying cold or heat. For me, one way that I regulate is by washing my hands in warm water, as this offers a physical distraction from my distress. Often, children will enjoy applying cold water or ice to their face or arms to help calm down.

-Snuggle together under a blanket, as the texture of the blanket can be soothing.

In order to build a knowledge of coping skills that work best for you and your children, I encourage you to think of ways that you feel peaceful and safe. Consider examples of things that evoke these feelings from your five senses. Our senses send direct messages regarding safety to our brain; therefore, when we feel peaceful and safe, our stress response begins to decrease.

Examples of peaceful sensory input:

Sight: pictures of special places, memories or nature

Smell: essential oils, favorite foods

Touch: soft blankets, worn teddy bears, rough or prickly surfaces, stress ball

Taste: cold water, peppermint, crisp apple or carrots

Sounds: music (maybe a soothing playlist), affirmations (from others or one you say to yourself)

"There is no normal life that is free of pain. It's the very wrestling with our problems that can be the impetus for our growth." -Mr. Rogers

- I think that one of the most powerful conversations that I've had with parents over the years is based on the concept of teaching children how to manage their emotions. Our understanding of neuroscience helps us to see that we naturally respond to stress in the fight/flight/freeze mode. As parents, we must be intentional about teaching our children how to manage stress so that they can learn the skills of distress tolerance and emotional regulation. In time and with practice, their executive brain can help to override the stress response and allow them to process stress using logic, reasoning, and healthy patterns of communication.
- As I will mention in the outdoor category, mindfulness is a natural way to build skills for self-regulation. Throughout the day, when things are calm, engage your children's senses. Ask them to notice what they see, smell, hear, taste, and feel. Again, it is so important that you participate in this with them.

"The true way to live is to enjoy every moment as it passes, and surely it is in the everyday things around us that the beauty of life lies."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakable Peace*

- I am an advocate of positive reinforcement. I love to use rewards systems to help reinforce the use of positive coping skills. We use a fuzzy jar at our house. When the jar is full, we celebrate and our girls earn a small prize (maybe new crayons, new coloring book, new socks, etc.). Rewards don't always have to be tangible. Some children may enjoy doing an activity together or having a special meal. You know your child best, so try to find small rewards that will speak to his/her love language. (reference to *The Five Love Languages of Children* by Gary Chapman)

Story-Telling:

"Can you tell me stories about family I don't know." -My adventurous and loving daughter, age 4.

- Since COVID, we've started a tradition with our daughter of telling her stories about family members who she was never able to meet. Her grandparents help with this too.
- Listen to music that's been passed from generation to generation (like old country hymns or classic oldies or the Beatles, or whatever you listened to when you were a kid). There's a sense of belonging and value that fills us when we connect to our past and honor the legacy of those who came before us.

I understand that many of our family stories are full of pain. I urge you to pull out the good. Gift your children with the positive attributes of their ancestors.

If you are a parent of an adopted child, I understand that family story-telling may be difficult. I would encourage you to tell stories about the family or friends with whom the child has the most contact. Even though they may not be related by blood, they are still very much shaped by the influences of these loved ones and the nurturing that they receive from them.

I love the part of the movie Moana when her grandmother's spirit sails underneath her boat as she voyages out to pursue her calling. It's powerful to share stories about the people (family or otherwise) who have supported and helped to pave the way for your family.

"Stories have to be told or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here."

-- Sue Monk Kidd, author of *The Secret Life of Bees*

Music:

- Sing together! Even if you're terrible (which I am), sing your heart out!
- If you have younger children, use the songs from Mr. Rogers or Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood to help reinforce positive behavior.

"I think it's very, very, very hard to wait, especially when you're waiting for something very nice. I think it's very, very, very hard to wait." -song by Mr. Rogers

- Make family playlists. Share stories about memories you have of the songs you include.
- Make a playlist for yourself (to encourage you in your parenting). Some of the songs that I find encouragement in this area are:
 - "Raise 'Em Up" by Keith Urban and Eric Church
 - "Planting Trees" by Andrew Peterson
 - "I See Me" by Travis Tritt
 - "How Can I Help You Say Goodbye" by Patty Loveless
 - "Small Town Southern Man" by Alan Jackson
 - "It's She Lovely" by Stevie Wonder
 - "I Hope you Dance" by Lee Anne Womack
 - "Blue" by Beyonce'
 - "The Sweetest Gift" by Sade

“Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” by Marvin Gaye

“Return to Pooh Corner” by Kenny Loggins

“Lullabye” by Billy Joel

“The One Thing” by Shakira

“Sweetest Devotion” by Adele

“Carried Me With You” by Brandi Carlile

**Note: tissues required for this activity.

Arts:

- Creating together is a wonderful way to engage your children. This is also a way that you can process emotions.
- Dan Siegel, author of *The Whole-Brain Child*, writes about the importance of integrating the left brain language with the right brain emotion. I often use art to help with this integration in individual therapy. Many times something that someone just can’t find the words or understanding for will begin to make sense as they create. Invite (don’t demand) for your children to share the symbolism of their work with you.
- Allow your children to share what they have drawn/created rather than guessing or assuming for yourself. I love to use the statement, “tell me about this... (for example, green spot in the middle). You can also use the phrases, “I notice that...”, “I wonder about...” when you are trying to learn more about the child’s interpretation of his/her work.
- Using art for connection and emotional processing should NEVER be focused on the outcome. This process is the healing, NOT the product.

If your child wants to mix his/her paint colors or play doh colors, let them.

“The important thing is to create”-Pablo Picasso

“Painting is just another way of keeping a diary”-Pablo Picasso

- For our homeschool preschool, we have printed art samples and displayed them in our home. We enjoyed printing art that is inspired by Van Gogh, and then creating our own art with similar features. My 4-year old has loved making her own versions of the swirls that are so distinctive of Van Gogh’s works.
- Incorporating natural products in art (like pinecone birdfeeders, or painting rocks) is an inexpensive way to create, and a great way to explore nature.

Dance:

- Have Dance Parties together!

This has become a part of our night-time routine. We love to listen to oldies and dance around our house. Even my husband, who has always been extremely reserved, joins in. This is another way to engage and nurture through smiling, holding hands, and eye contact.

- As you listen to music or tell stories together, encourage your children (even older kiddos) to act out the parts. These may be simple movements, like “stomp your feet like the bear”, or it could lead to more theatrical endeavours. In these moments, as my 12th grade English teacher used to tell us, “the answer is Yes!”. Allow your creativity to lead the way (even if it’s only for 5 minutes).

As I recall my 12th grade English class, I must share that this is the place where I fell in love with literature. Our teacher taught us to create without judgement. This was also the place where I had my first and only theater experience. Two of my best friends and I acted out a short scene from the novel *Wuthering Heights*. I have never forgotten how fun this was. Brief moments and intentionality from a trusted adult lead to unforgettable experiences. I encourage you to offer that to your children.

Silence:

- When our oldest daughter was one year old, she was referred for an evaluation because she “failed 4 out of 5 of her developmental screenings”. We were riddled with anxiety. When her evaluation finally came, she passed all of her screenings.

The issue: she had quiet parents. We hadn’t been talking to her enough.

Since then, I’ve tried to make up for lost time. Sometimes I find myself just chattering away. In those moments, I have to stop and remind myself that it is ok to be quiet. It’s ok to push her on the swing without saying anything. That gives her time to think her own thoughts and observe the world around her.

We certainly need a balance of silence and sharing. In your efforts with this, just remember that it’s easy to get caught up in this fast paced world. It’s ok to just “be” together.

“The tree of silence bears the fruit of peace.” Proverb

Play:

“Play is the child’s symbolic language of self-expression and can reveal (a) what the child has experienced; (b) reactions to what was experienced; (c) feelings about what was experienced; (d) what the child wishes, wants, or needs; and (e) the child’s perception of self.”

— Garry L. Landreth, *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship*

“Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.” -Mr. Rogers

“Do not keep children to their studies by compulsion but by play.” -Plato

“The playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery.” -Erik H. Erikson

How to Give Children the Gift of Play (from <https://www.yourtherapysource.com>):

Rather than overscheduling today's children, here are tips to help give children the gift of play:

1. Make play a priority. Sometimes we have to say no to certain outings, events or activities. Family life is challenging enough, but downtime, where kids can just be kids, is a necessity for children.
2. Allow for independence. If your children are old enough, leave them alone to play sometimes. Don't hover. This will help you and them.
3. Provide some lead-in activities. Sometimes, children need a little guidance and direction so you can set the stage, and then allow them to go from there.
4. Make yourself busy but with nothing too exciting. If you are busy completing a task, most likely the kids will occupy themselves with play. If you are busy watching videos on your phone, most likely the kids will surround you. Choose wisely.
5. Schedule time to play. Busy schedules can compromise this special time, so be sure to include it in your plans.

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.” -Mr. Rogers

Family Reading time:

- Reading is so very important for children. Reading with their family is even more so. Sarah Mackenzie is a stay-at-home mother of 6, who homeschools, and speaks and writes about how to connect families through reading. I highly recommend her book *The Read Aloud Family* and her podcast *Read-Aloud Revival*. She offers many practical ways to involve families in fun reading activities.

Here are a few of her thoughts...

“A book can’t change the world on its own. But a book can change readers. And readers? They can change the world.”

— Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*

“... the more children are read to, the higher their test scores are—sometimes by as much as a half a year’s schooling. This was true regardless of a family’s income. He goes on to say that reading aloud has proven to be so powerful in increasing a child’s academic success that it is more effective than expensive tutoring or even private education.”

— Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*

“We read with our children because it gives both them and us an education of the heart and mind. Of intellect and empathy. We read together and learn because stories teach us how to love.”

— Sarah Mackenzie, *The Read-Aloud Family: Making Meaningful and Lasting Connections with Your Kids*

****Note:** If your children are accustomed to a lot of screentime, audiobooks make a great transition to reading aloud. Hearing different voices for the characters in the book may also allow them to follow the plot of the story and enjoy the experience more easily than just listening to one parent read aloud in the same tone of voice.

Explore Nature:

“When we embark on a hard adventure with our kids, we must make sure our kids know we believe in them. This not only helps them to believe in their own ability to conquer the challenge but also knits their hearts with ours as we rise to the challenge together.”

— Greta Eskridge, *Adventuring Together: How to Create Connections and Make Lasting Memories with Your Kids*

- My sister-in-law, who has three children whom she homeschools, shares that outside time is a vital part of the day for her family.

Some of her ideas include: Go outside everyday, even on rainy days (get out those rain boots and splash!), visit state parks, find local trails or creeks. During the summer, plan to go outside in the mornings (8am-10am isn't as hot), make use of the garden hose, wading pool, or slip and slide to stay cool, hike or take a bike ride each week, keep a nature journal with your family, educate your children (and yourself, if you're like me) on what they find in nature.

- Backyard books by Judy Allen are great for learning about insects (like butterflies, ladybugs, and dragonflies)

- Teach mindfulness.

Outside is the perfect place to practice basic mindfulness. Ask your children what they can see, hear, taste, touch, smell when you are outside together. Mindfulness is a wonderful way to help with emotional regulation, so this is a time when you can really practice this skill so that it can become a habit that you and your children can use in times of distress.

"We get so wrapped up in numbers in our society. The most important thing is that we are able to be one-to-one, you and I with each other at the moment. If we can be present to the moment with the person that we happen to be with, that's what's important."-Mr. Rogers

Ideas for Enjoying the Outdoors with Your Children

(from Dr. Miles Gilliom, Behavioral Health Therapist, Cary, N.C.)

- It doesn't go well when kids are just asked to go outside. Parents need to join them outdoors.
- Take inside activities outside with you. Some ideas include: Pokemon Go, board games and cards, and time around a firepit.
- Get involved in your children's sports. Since they can't attend team practices right now, practice with them. Make every effort to just participate, rather than coaching them. Trust their coach to coach them, while you simply participate and enjoy the activity together.
- Some fun COVID-friendly activities include: birdwatching, gardening, "All Trails" app, 100 mile challenge through N.C. Parks system.
- Tune up those bikes and hit the trails or greenways.
- Start new family traditions. For example, after dinner walks or "rolls" (Dr. Gilliom shares that members of his family sometimes choose between using bikes, roller blades, or skateboards in their "roll-time").

"Outdoors allow us to be present rather than avoidant due to our own anxiety." (Dr. Gilliom)

**Note about new traditions: We have space in our lives that we didn't before. Consider how you can use your traditional commute time, breaks, exercise time, or lunch hours to build some adventure into your family life.

**You may need to reframe your view of self-care, but it is still crucial for you as a parent. Self-care will not be perfect under COVID conditions, but make every effort you can to spend time caring for yourself and your adult relationships. It's ok for you to redefine "success" in this area.

Spiritual Guidance:

"It isn't about how long we pray or how many times we have to bring our minds back when it wanders off. It's about showing up, sitting at the foot of the cross, and putting aside our own will in order to give ourselves completely to His."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakable Peace*

- Tell your children stories from scripture.

Our church has been working to make children's sunday school lessons via youtube videos. I thought this would be a great way to help my 4 year old remain connected. Boy, was I wrong... she was not at all interested in hearing how Jesus healed the blind man when she was watching it on the screen. However, when I turned the screen off and told her the story myself, she was engaged, and she even asked several questions.

Sometimes we are tempted to add to the story. The word is truth, we need not add anything when we are telling these stories to our children.

- Have real conversations with your children.

Children have real questions, and often they are afraid to ask you about them. Talk about issues that you know they hear about (diversity, religion, good vs. evil, physical handicaps, sex). They need to learn about these things from you instead of their friends or screens.

As a Christian, my 4 year old and I were recently reading a Cherokee Legend storybook. I wondered if I should point out the differences between our beliefs and theirs, so I went for it. My precious little girl heard first from her mother that other people believe differently than our family. Again, she asked questions, and by God's grace, I planted seeds that we are called by God to love all people. When she meets these differences in her life, apart from her family, I pray that our conversations about this will come to her mind.

Ideas: Reading poetry together can open up dialogue about bigger matters like faith, pain, love.

"Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." -Robert Frost

- Pray together throughout the day.

Many times, when my children have been upset, tantruming, sick, or afraid, we have stopped to pray together. This doesn't usually fix the situation immediately, but it does give us a chance to take a break from the situation and re-approach it more clearly.

Many people whom I've spoken with over the years believe that she shouldn't "burden God with the little things", but this is contrary to scripture...

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." -Philippians 4:6

One way that we teach our children that God cares for them is my modeling a relationship with him, which includes talking to him.

My husband has to travel with work occasionally, and it gets pretty intense around our house when he's gone. One night around 9:30pm, our youngest was still crying in her bed, wanting me to rock her "one more time", and our oldest, needing to be put to bed, was, once again, in her closet looking for yet another change of clothes. I knelt down by the bed and cupped my face with my hands. My oldest came to me and said, "Mommy, what you doing?" I told her that I was praying for strength. She cupped her little hands together and prayed with me.

It seems like the moments that we've struggled the most, God has provided beauty and strength to keep going.

- As a parent, have your own quiet time where you spend time in prayer and reading scripture.

This has been the single-most helpful thing that I have ever done, for parenting, my marriage, or otherwise.

One area that I am constantly trying to improve in my own life is disciplining myself to not allow my duties to become my distractions. I'm going to say that phrase again here, duties often become our distractions. Why? Because of the pile of laundry, the gifts that need to be purchased, the bills that need to be paid, the spring cleaning that should have been done months ago, the check-up you need to schedule, the next meal you need to prepare, and now... the schoolwork you have to monitor while you work during the day. (Here comes that chest pain again!)

As I began the practice of submitting my anxious thoughts and never-ending to-do list to the Lord, I often felt that I didn't know how to pray. Two simple books that have helped me tremendously with this are: *Every Moment Holy: Vol. 1* (a book of liturgies for daily life and *Praying the Bible* by Donald Whitney

"Lead me by your mercies through these hours, that I might spend them well, not in harried pursuit of my own agendas, rather in good service to you. Teach me to shepherd the small duties of this day with great love, tending faithfully those tasks you place within my care and tending with patience

and kindness the needs and hearts of those people you place within my reach.” -Every Moment Holy, Liturgy for First Waking

“If I try to pray for people or events without having the word in front of me guiding my prayers, then several negative things happen. One is that I tend to be very repetitive... I just pray the same things all the time. Another negative thing is that my mind tends to wander.” -John Piper, from Praying the Bible

- Listen to Christian music together (incorporate this in your daily routine). This is another opportunity for you to share music from your family history if you have a faith background. We love the *Precious Memories* album by Alan Jackson. Recently, my daughters and I were all in the bathroom together. Our two year old was sitting on the potty (practicing her potty training) and our four year old was brushing her hair (practicing her morning habits), and they were both belting out “Love lifted me! Love lifted me!” It was quite a joyful noise coming from our little bathroom.

How in the World Will I do all of This???Look for Beautiful Overlaps:

The overlaps make this huge list of ideas possible.

So many of these areas blend together so naturally, that, if we aren't mindful of them, the moments go by unnoticed.

My example of my daughters singing in the bathroom together shows that all at once, and within 5 minutes, we can: work on habits/self-discipline, engage with smiling and music, and make progress with our morning routine (keeping our structure).

Spending time outdoors is another area of abundant natural overlap.

End Note of Encouragement:

My mother used to tell me this story:

Once, a little girl had a jar. She had to fill it with big rocks, pebbles, sand and water. In order to get the most in the jar, she started with the big rocks, then added the pebbles, followed by the sand, and lastly, she poured the water in the jar. Maximum capacity.

Lesson: Your life is going to be full of something. Make sure you're getting in the most important things first.

My goal in writing this to you is to help you gain insight into the things that are most important to your family. From this insight, my hope is that this will shape your priorities for each day. It's so easy to mindlessly zone into tasks and screens, meanwhile allowing precious, countless hours pass without being mindful of your desires or intentions for being a great parent.

Special Encouragement for Homeschooling or Virtual Learning:

From the book, *The Core: Teaching Your Child the Foundations of Classical Education*

- Few of today's parents were raised in a culture of home-centered education, so expect it to occasionally be frustrating to develop.
- It is hard to re-create something you haven't seen before.
- Sometimes we have to get used to being with our children (They don't act like adults).
- The rewards of home-centered education come in small moments of progress and success shared as a family.
- As a parent, my role is to see that my children are prepared to be confident and competent generally. As they become adults they will need to take over the responsibility for educating themselves specifically.

"The God who turned water into wine can take our smallest efforts and weave them into a glorious tapestry for His delight."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakable Peace*

"You are made in the image and likeness of God, and you have exactly what you need to be the mother that He wants you to be. Figure out what drives you and then let your kids shine within the atmosphere you create. Trying to be something you're not, trying hard to provide your kids with the education that the blogger-next-door is giving hers will burn you out and make you want to quit the whole project entirely."

— Sarah Mackenzie, *Teaching from Rest: A Homeschooler's Guide to Unshakable Peace*

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To my clients: Tears fill my eyes as I write this. You are so very special to me. I see your pain, but I also see your precious spirit. You are doing the hard work, and you are seeing fruits of your labor. You inspire me daily to be a better person and parent. I admire your resiliency, your dreams, your vulnerability, and your deep love for your children and your families.

Thank you all for giving me these precious insights from your experience. Thank you for sharing the treasures that you’ve stored in your heart and memories that you’ve made in your journey as a parent. I am humbled and filled with gratitude for each of you.

“Keep dunin’ what you’re dunin.” -My sweet daughter, age 2.

Podcast Resources for Parents:

Be A Problem Solver Podcast with Kate & Cory

Respectful Parenting by Janet Lansbury

Read-Aloud Revival by Sarah Mackenzie

Simply Charlotte Mason by Sonya Shafer

The Proverbs 31 Ministries podcast

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-*Positive Parenting Solutions*

-*Conscious Discipline*

-<https://www.yourtherapysource.com>